

CHAPTER XI

THE COMING OF THE RED-HEADED MAN

Half of the three years of probation had gone by and once more we found ourselves at Dunchester in August. Under circumstances still too recent to need explanation, the Government of which I was a member had decided to appeal to the country, the General Election being fixed for the end of September, after the termination of harvest. Dunchester was considered to be a safe Radical seat, and, as a matter of parliamentary tactics, the poll for this city, together with that of eight or ten other boroughs, was fixed for the earliest possible day, in the hope that the results might encourage more doubtful places to give their support. Constituencies are very like sheep, and if the leaders jump through a certain gap in the political hedge the flock, or a large proportion of it, will generally follow. All of us like to be on the winning side.

Few people who are old enough to remember it will ever forget the August of two years ago, if only because of the phenomenal heat. Up to that month the year had been very cold, so cold that even during July there were some evenings when a fire was welcome, while on several days I saw people driving about the roads wrapped up in heavy ulsters. But with the first day of August all this changed, and suddenly the climate became torrid, the nights especially being extraordinarily hot. From every quarter of the country came complaints of the great heat, while each

issue of the newspapers contained lists of those who had fallen victims to it.

One evening, feeling oppressed in the tree-enclosed park of Ashfields, I strolled out of it into the suburb of which I have spoken. Almost opposite the private garden of the park stands a board school, and in front of this board school I had laid out an acre of land presented by myself, as a playground and open space for the use of the public. In the centre of this garden was a fountain that fell into a marble basin, and around the fountain, but at some distance from it, stood iron seats. To these I made my way and sat down on one of them, which was empty, in order to enjoy the cool sound of the splashing water, about which a large number of children were playing.

Presently, as I sat thus, I lifted my eyes and saw the figure of a man approaching towards the other side of the fountain. He was quite fifty yards away from me, so that his features were invisible, but there was something about his general aspect which attracted my attention at once. To begin with, he looked small and lonely, all by himself out there on the wide expanse of gravel; moreover, the last rays of the setting sun, striking full upon him, gave him a fiery and unnatural appearance against the dense background of shadows beyond. It is a strange and dreadful coincidence, but by some extraordinary action of the mind, so subtle that I cannot trace the link, the apparition of this man out of the gloom into the fierce light of the sunset reminded me of a picture that I had once seen representing the approach to the Norwegian harbour

of the ship which brought the plague to the shores of Scandanavia. In the picture that ship also was clothed with the fires of sunset, while behind it lay the blackness of approaching night. Like this wanderer that ship also came forward, slowly indeed, but without pause, as though alive with a purpose of its own, and I remember that awaiting it upon the quay were a number of merry children.

Shaking myself free from this ridiculous but unpleasant thought, I continued to observe the man idly. Clearly he was one of the great army of tramps, for his coat was wide and ragged and his hat half innocent of rim, although there was something about his figure which suggested to me that he had seen better days. I could even imagine that under certain circumstances I might have come to look very much like this poor man, now doubtless turned into a mere animal by drink. He drew on with a long slow step, his head stretched forward, his eyes fixed upon the water, as he walked now and again lifting a long thin hand and scraping impatiently at his face and head.

"That poor fellow has got a touch of prickly heat and is thirsty," I thought, nor was I mistaken, for, on arriving at the edge of the fountain, the tramp knelt down and drank copiously, making a moaning sound as he gulped the water, which was very peculiar and unpleasant to hear. When he had satisfied his thirst, he sat himself upon the marble edge of the basin and suddenly plunged his legs, boots and all, into the water. Its touch seemed to please him, for with a single swift movement he slipped in altogether, sitting himself down on the bottom of the

basin in such fashion that only his face and fiery red beard, from which the hat had fallen, remained above the surface, whereon they seemed to float like some monstrous and unnatural growth.

This unusual proceeding on the part of the tramping stranger at once excited the most intense interest in the mind of every child on the playground, with the result that in another minute forty or fifty of them had gathered round the fountain, laughing and jeering at its occupant. Again the sight brought to my mind a strained and disagreeable simile, for I bethought me of the dreadful tale of Elisha and of the fate which overtook the children who mocked him. Decidedly the heat had upset my nerves that night, nor were they soothed when suddenly from the red head floating upon the water came a flute-like and educated voice, saying--

"Cease deriding the unfortunate, children, or I will come out of this marble bath and tickle you."

Thereat they laughed all the more, and began to pelt the bather with little stones and bits of stick.

At first I thought of interfering, but as it occurred to me that the man would probably be violent or abusive if I spoke to him, and as, above all things, I disliked scenes, I made up my mind to fetch a policeman, whom I knew I should find round the corner about a hundred yards away. I walked to the corner, but did not find the policeman, whereon I started

across the square to look for him at another point. My road led me past the fountain, and, as I approached it, I saw that the water-loving wanderer had been as good as his word. He had emerged from the fountain, and, rushing to and fro raining moisture from his wide coat, despite their shrieks half of fear and half of laughter, he grabbed child after child and, drawing it to him, tickled and kissed it, laughing dementedly all the while, in a fashion which showed me that he was suffering from some form of mania.

As soon as he saw me the man dropped the last child he had caught--it was little Tottie Smith--and began to stride away towards the city at the same slow, regular, purposeful gait with which I had seen him approach the fountain. As he passed he turned and made a grimace at me, and then I saw his dreadful face. No wonder it had looked red at a distance, for the erythema almost covered it, except where, on the forehead and cheeks, appeared purple spots and patches.

Of what did it remind me?

Great Heaven! I remembered. It reminded me of the face of that girl I had seen lying in the plaza of San Jose, in Mexico, over whom the old woman was pouring water from the fountain, much such a fountain as that before me, for half unconsciously, when planning this place, I had reproduced its beautiful design. It all came back to me with a shock, the horrible scene of which I had scarcely thought for years, so vividly indeed that I seemed to hear the old hag's voice crying in cracked

accents, "Si, señor, viruela, viruela!"

I ought to have sent to warn the police and the health officers of the city, for I was sure that the man was suffering from what is commonly called confluent smallpox. But I did not. From the beginning there has been something about this terrible disease which physically and morally has exercised so great an influence over my destiny, that seemed to paralyse my mental powers. In my day I was a doctor fearless of any other contagion; typhus, scarletina, diphtheria, yellow fever, none of them had terrors for me. And yet I was afraid to attend a case of smallpox. From the same cause, in my public speeches I made light of it, talking of it with contempt as a sickness of small account, much as a housemaid talks in the servants' hall of the ghost which is supposed to haunt the back stairs.

And now, coming as it were from that merry and populous chamber of life and health, once again I met the Spectre I derided, a red-headed, red-visaged Thing that chose me out to stop and grin at. Somehow I was not minded to return and announce the fact.

"Why," they would say, "you were the one who did not believe in ghosts. It was you who preached of vile superstitions, and yet merely at the sight of a shadow you rush in with trembling hands and bristling hair to bid us lay it with bell, book, and candle. Where is your faith, O prophet?"

It was nonsense; the heat and all my incessant political work had tried me and I was mistaken. That tramp was a drunken, or perhaps a crazy creature, afflicted with some skin disease such as are common among his class. Why did I allow the incident to trouble me?

I went home and washed out my mouth, and sprinkled my clothes with a strong solution of permanganate of potash, for, although my own folly was evident, it is always as well to be careful, especially in hot weather. Still I could not help wondering what might happen if by any chance smallpox were to get a hold of a population like that of Dunchester, or indeed of a hundred other places in England.

Since the passing of the famous Conscience Clause many years before, as was anticipated would be the case, and as the anti-vaccinators intended should be the case, vaccination had become a dead letter amongst at least seventy-five per cent. of the people.[*] Our various societies and agents were not content to let things take their course and to allow parents to vaccinate their children, or to leave them unvaccinated as they might think fit. On the contrary, we had instituted a house-to-house canvass, and our visitors took with them forms of conscientious objection, to be filled in by parents or guardians, and legally witnessed.

[*] Since the above was written the author has read in the press that in Yorkshire a single bench of magistrates out of the hundreds in England has already granted orders on the

ground of "conscientious objection," under which some 2000 children are exempted from the scope of the Vaccination Acts. So far as he has seen this statement has not been contradicted. At Ipswich also about 700 applications, affecting many children, have been filed. To deal with these the Bench is holding special sessions, sitting at seven o'clock in the evening.

At first the magistrates refused to accept these forms, but after a while, when they found how impossible it was to dive into a man's conscience and to decide what was or what was not "conscientious objection," they received them as sufficient evidence, provided only that they were sworn before some one entitled to administer oaths. Many of the objectors did not even take the trouble to do as much as this, for within five years of the passing of the Act, in practice the vaccination laws ceased to exist. The burden of prosecution rested with Boards of Guardians, popularly elected bodies, and what board was likely to go to the trouble of working up a case and to the expense of bringing it before the court, when, to produce a complete defence, the defendant need only declare that he had a conscientious objection to the law under which the information was laid against him? Many idle or obstinate or prejudiced people would develop conscientious objections to anything which gives trouble or that they happen to dislike. For instance, if the same principle were applied to education, I believe that within a very few years not twenty-five per cent. of the children belonging to the classes that are educated out of the rates would ever pass the School

Board standards.

Thus it came about that the harvest was ripe, and over ripe, awaiting only the appointed sickle of disease. Once or twice already that sickle had been put in, but always before the reaping began it was stayed by the application of the terrible rule of isolation known as the improved Leicester system.

Among some of the natives of Africa when smallpox breaks out in a kraal, that kraal is surrounded by guards and its inhabitants are left to recover or perish, to starve or to feed themselves as chance and circumstance may dictate. During the absence of the smallpox laws the same plan, more mercifully applied, prevailed in England, and thus the evil hour was postponed. But it was only postponed, for like a cumulative tax it was heaping up against the country, and at last the hour had come for payment to an authority whose books must be balanced without remittance or reduction. What is due to nature that nature takes in her own way and season, neither less nor more, unless indeed the skill and providence of man can find means to force her to write off the debt.

Five days after my encounter with the red-headed vagrant, the following paragraph appeared in one of the local papers: "Pocklingham. In the casual ward of the Union house for this district a tramp, name unknown, died last night. He had been admitted on the previous evening, but, for some unexplained reason, it was not noticed until the next morning that

he suffered from illness, and, therefore, he was allowed to mix with the other inmates in the general ward. Drs. Butt and Clarkson, who were called in to attend, state that the cause of death was the worst form of smallpox. The body will be buried in quicklime, but some alarm is felt in the district owing to the deceased, who, it is said, arrived here from Dunchester, where he had been frequenting various tramps' lodgings, having mixed with a number of other vagrants, who left the house before the character of his sickness was discovered, and who cannot now be traced. The unfortunate man was about forty years of age, of medium height, and red-haired."

The same paper had an editorial note upon this piece of news, at the end of which it remarked, as became a party and an anti-vaccination organ: "The terror of this 'filth disease,' which in our fathers' time amounted almost to insanity, no longer afflicts us, who know both that its effects were exaggerated and how to deal with it by isolation without recourse to the so-called vaccine remedies, which are now rejected by a large proportion of the population of these islands. Still, as we have ascertained by inquiry that this unfortunate man did undoubtedly spend several days and nights wandering about our city when in an infectious condition, it will be as well that the authorities should be on the alert. We do not want that hoary veteran--the smallpox scare--to rear its head again in Dunchester, least of all just now, when, in view of the imminent election, the accustomed use would be made of it by our prejudiced and unscrupulous political opponents."

"No," I said to myself as I put the paper down, "certainly we do not want a smallpox scare just now, and still less do we want the smallpox." Then I thought of that unfortunate red-headed wretch, crazy with the torment of his disease, and of his hideous laughter, as he hunted and caught the children who made a mock of him--the poor children, scarcely one of whom was vaccinated.

A week later I opened my political campaign with a large public meeting in the Agricultural Hall. Almost up to the nomination day no candidate was forthcoming on the other side, and I thought that, for the fourth time, I should be returned unopposed. Of a sudden, however, a name was announced, and it proved to be none other than that of my rival of many years ago--Sir Thomas Colford--now like myself growing grey-headed, but still vigorous in mind and body, and as much respected as ever by the wealthier and more educated classes of our community. His appearance in the field put a new complexion on matters; it meant, indeed, that instead of the easy and comfortable walk over which I had anticipated, I must fight hard for my political existence.

In the course of my speech, which was very well received, for I was still popular in the town even among the more moderate of my opponents, I dwelt upon Sir Thomas Colford's address to the electorate which had just come into my hands. In this address I was astonished to see a paragraph advocating, though in a somewhat guarded fashion, the re-enactment of the old laws of compulsory vaccination. In a draft which had reached me two days before through some underground channel, this

paragraph had not appeared, thus showing that it had been added by an afterthought and quite suddenly. However, there it was, and I made great play with it.

What, I asked the electors of Dunchester, could they think of a man who in these modern and enlightened days sought to reimpose upon a free people the barbarous infamies of the Vaccination Acts? Long ago we had fought that fight, and long ago we had relegated them to limbo, where, with such things as instruments of torment, papal bulls and writs of attainder, they remained to excite the wonder and the horror of our own and future generations.

Well would it have been for me if I had stopped here, but, led away by the subject and by the loud cheers that my treatment of it, purposely flamboyant, never failed to evoke, forgetful too for the moment of the Red-headed Man, I passed on to deductions. Our opponents had prophesied, I said, that within ten years of the passing of the famous Conscience Clause smallpox would be rampant. Now what were the facts? Although almost twice that time had gone by, here in Dunchester we had suffered far less from smallpox than during the compulsory period, for at no one time during all these eighteen or twenty years had three cases been under simultaneous treatment within the confines of the city.

"Well, there are five now," called out a voice from the back of the hall.

I drew myself up and made ready to wither this untruthful brawler with my best election scorn, when, of a sudden, I remembered the Red-headed Man, and passed on to the consideration of foreign affairs.

From that moment all life went out of my speech, and, as it seemed to me, the enthusiasm of the meeting died away. As soon as it was over I made inquiries, to find that the truth had been hidden from me--there were five, if not seven cases of smallpox in different parts of the city, and the worst feature of the facts was that three of the patients were children attending different schools. One of these children, it was ascertained, had been among those who were playing round the fountain about a fortnight since, although he was not one whom the red-haired tramp had touched, but the other two had not been near the fountain. The presumption was, therefore, that they had contracted the disease through some other source of infection, perhaps at the lodging-house where the man had spent the night after bathing in the water. Also it seemed that, drawn thither by the heat, in all two or three hundred children had visited the fountain square on this particular evening, and that many of them had drunk water out of the basin.

Never do I remember feeling more frightened than when these facts came to my knowledge, for, added to the possible terrors of the position, was my constitutional fear of the disease which I have already described. On my way homewards I met a friend who told me that one of the children was dead, the malady, which was of an awful type, having done its work very swiftly.

Like a first flake from a snow-cloud, like a first leaf falling in autumn from among the myriads on some great tree, so did this little life sink from our number into the silence of the grave. Ah! how many were to follow? There is a record, I believe, but I cannot give it. In Dunchester alone, with its population of about 50,000, I know that we had over 5000 deaths, and Dunchester was a focus from which the pestilence spread through the kingdom, destroying and destroying and destroying with a fury that has not been equalled since the days of the Black Death.

But all this was still to come, for the plague did not get a grip at once. An iron system of isolation was put in force, and every possible means was adopted by the town authorities, who, for the most part, were anti-vaccinationists, to suppress the facts, a task in which they were assisted by the officials of the Local Government Board, who had their instructions on the point. As might have been expected, the party in power did not wish the political position to be complicated by an outcry for the passing of a new smallpox law, so few returns were published, and as little information as possible was given to the papers.

For a while there was a lull; the subject of smallpox was taboo, and nobody heard much about it beyond vague and indefinite rumours. Indeed, most of us were busy with the question of the hour--the eternal question of beer, its purity and the method of its sale. For my part, I made few inquiries; like the ostrich of fable I hid my head in the sands of

political excitement, hoping that the arrows of pestilence would pass us by.

And yet, although I breathed no word of my fears to a living soul, in my heart I was terribly afraid.